DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 299 603 CS 506 388

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TITLE The Ratings Sweeps: An Essay on the Ethics of Television Economics.
PUB DATE 6 Nov 88
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (74th, New Orleans, LA, November 3-6, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Advertising; Audiences; *Broadcast Television; Ethics; *Programing (Broadcast); Television Commercials; Television Research
IDENTIFIERS Advertising Effectiveness; *Television Networks

ABSTRACT

The ethical dilemma presented by the ratings sweeps is a fundamental operating principle of advertiser-financed television broadcasting: broadcasters generate operating revenue and profit by exchanging audiences for money with advertisers. In order to create or attract audiences to be sold, the broadcaster formulates or acquires and then circulates cultural images in the form of programs and commercial advertisements as a "consciousness industry." By examining the ethical dimensions of the marketplace practices motivated by audience measurement, it should be possible to interrogate the fundamental assumptions of culture production situated in the political, social, and economic environment created by monopoly capitalism. For the television industry, quantitative audience measurement is the primary mechanism of audience commodification and the ratings sweeps are acts of containment on the part of the broadcasters. The immense up-front cost of television programs capable of generating larger-than-average audiences will continue to inhibit year-round production, and advertising revenue will continue to coalesce at certain times of the year. As long as advertisers accept the broadcasters' claims of viewer cooperation, the ethical dilemmas of television economics will remain. With, or without, formal ratings sweeps, advertiser financed television broadcasters will continue to profit from this absurdity that substitutes the financial exigencies of private capital for the cultural potential of television as social communication. (Thirty-eight references are attached.) (RAE)

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The ratings sweeps:
An essay on the ethics of television economics

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Ratings Sweeps:
An essay on the ethics of television economics

Introduction

The ethical dilemma presented by the ratings sweeps is a fundamental operating principle of advertiser financed television broadcasting: broadcasters generate operating revenue (and, it is hoped, profit) by exchanging audiences for money with advertisers. In order to attract or create audiences to be sold, the broadcaster formulates or acquires and then circulates cultural images in the form of programs and commercial advertisements as a "consciousness industry," a term used by Smythe (1981) in his elaboration of television as an Ideological State Apparatus, based on a application of Althusser (1971) to the practices of the broadcasting industries in the United States and Canada. Therefore, the practice of periodically measuring local television audiences provides a quantitative link between the advertisers belief in the potential of television as persuasive communication (see Barnouw, 1978 and Fox, 1984), the ideological operation of television as a culture industry (see Tuchman, 1974 and Ewen, 1976, in addition to Smythe) and the viewer's construction of televisual experience (as theorised by cultural critics, such as Williams, 1977 and Fiske, 1987). By examining the ethical dimensions of the marketplace practices motivated by audience measurement, it should be possible to interrogate the fundamental assumptions of culture production situated in the political, social, and economic environment created by monopoly capitalism.

Ethics, in the context of this paper, refers to the sense of moral imperative to achieve ideal ends to human activity. To take an ethical perspective on the ratings sweeps (the intersection of communication, culture and industry) requires an assessment of the social utility generated by the activity in question. In order to define that utility, this paper examines the practice of periodically measuring local television audiences (the so-called ratings sweeps) at two distinct points of social interest: 1) the potential for fraudulent distortion ("hypoing" the ratings) and 2) the manipulation of regularly scheduled programming ("hyping" the ratings).

The ratings sweeps--Function and practice

If the audience is the commodity, than both broadcaster and advertiser require independent verification of the quantity and, to some extent, the quality of the audience purchased. Unlike point-of-purchase acquisitions, in which the audience receives their value directly from the seller (such as motion picture theaters, book stores, audio record stores, video sales and rental), the network television audience buys directly only the television set. Instead of ticket stubs and sales reciepts, the broadcaster can only offer assurance to the advertisier that the commercial advertisement has been transmitted. For this reason, various survey organizations (Hooper, beginning in 1935, and later superceded by A.C. Nielsen and Arbitron, among others) come into being, in part, to provide random sample survey data designed to estimate the various audiences for broadcast programs for the purpose of mediating the business relationship between

broadcaster and advertiser (Barnouw, 1968; Sterling and Kittross, 1978).

Quaal and Brown's Broadcast Management (1976), for a decade the major broadcast management textbook, noted the importance of ratings in the operation of a broadcast station for the simple reason that the station manager needs to know how many people are watching her/his station. [1.] The authors concluded that the difficulty with ratings based on sample survey methodology stems "not so much from their existence as from their frequency and their interpretations and also from how how they are applied in broadcast planning (p. 141)." In terms of frequency, local and total national television ratings data are collected four times per year: th four weeks in the the middle of the first, second and fourth quarters of the year (February, May and November) and the beginning of the summer (July). These are the so-called "sweeps periods," and the data collected then will provide the basis for establishing advertising rates (local and national) for the following quarter. [2.] Continuous collection of data, while methodologically and technologically possible, has not yet proved economically feasible outside the major television markets. By limiting the data collection period to only a fraction of the total programming, the process encourages broadcasters to concentrate their most attractive programming in the sweeps period. In this way, the advertising rates established for the purchase of time within typical programming are influenced by the ratings generated by atypical programming. It is important to note, that the actual amounts charged to the advertiser vary according to the negotiating skills of the time buyer;

advertising rates are influenced by market factors other than the sweeps. But the industrial culture of the television industry is defined by the ratings sweeps, which quantify the commodity sold, thereby creating a hierarchy of relative value in both local and national television markets.

Fraudulent distortion--Hypoing the ratings

At the level of industrial practice, the most vexing ethical dilemma is defined by the question, "When is a promotional activity legitimate (hype) and when is it fraudulent (hypoing)?" The boundary between promotion and fraud is slippery, so much so that, in 1965, the Federal Trade Commission issued "Guidelines Regarding Deceptive Claims of Broadcast Audience Coverage" (F.T.C., 1965). This listing of proscribed behaviors followed Congressional hearings on ratings manipulation as practiced at the station level. The guidelines banned activities "calculated to distort or to inflate" ratings, including contests, programming, advertising and promotions "designed to increase audiences only during the [sweeps] period." The guidelines are still in effect, but carry no penalities and have never been enforced, according to Lynn Colbet of the F.T.C. (McDougal, 1988).

More problematic, however, is the inability of the guidelines to truly distinguish between deceptive and acceptable practices. Two different situations arose in 1987 that illustrate this difficulty. In one, at least three television stations (KARE-TV, Minneapolis; WXIA-TV, Atlanta; and WCPX-TV, Orlando) utilized the services of Atkinson Research, a

Minneapolis-based consulting firm that mailed survey questionaires requesting responses to each stations' local newscast (Broadcasters scream, 1987; Ratings hypoing, 1987; Rees, 1987). Included with the questionaire was a cover letter requesting that respondents "watch as often as possible for the next seven days....Try to watch at 10 p.m. especially (Lines blur, 1987, p. 41). Market research is a standard tool used by station management to improve service, but the questionaires for KARE-TV and WXIA-TV were mailed during the last week in April, just before the May sweeps, and the questionaires for WCPX-TV were mailed in October, referring to news stories that would run during the November sweeps, and after much discussion of the Minneapolis and Atlanta cases in the trade press.

The issue raised by the Atkinson surveys centered not on the legitimacy of the research, but on the timing. Competing stations in each of the markets complained that the surveys were forms of promotion, since they linked the questionaires to requests for viewing. In Minneapolis, Ron Handberg, general manager of rival WCCO-TV, called the the research project a "mass mail attempt to manipulate the ratings on the part of the third place station in the market." Stanley Hubbard, the Minneapolis-based media owner, deemed the KARE attempt as "phony as a $3 bill (both quoted in Competitors protest, 1987, p. 140)".

The second case involved programming aimed directly at those who participate in Nielsen's audience measurement. KABC-TV, Los Angeles, aired an eight-part special mini-documentary series in its 11 p.m. newscast from May 18 to May 27, 1987. Creating mini-

documentary series that would attract additional viewers during the sweeps is accepted practice (see following discussion), but KABC-TV's series was about the Nielsen ratings in general and about Nielsen "families" in specific. Also, John Holt, Chairman and Chief Executive Officer of the A.C. Nielsen Company, was interviewed for the series that also featured footage of the Nielsen offices in Dunedin, Florida.

Competing stations in Los Angeles, the second largest television market in the United States, protested that the series called attention to the sweeps in violation of Nielsen guidelines. More important to the competitors was the nature of the stories themselves in relationship to the actual Nielsen respondents. Jane Collins, director of research for KTTV-TV and head of the Los Angeles TV Station Research Committee, expressed the feelings of the competition: "If you are one of those families, obviously you're going to want to find out all about a group you are included in (quoted in Richter, 1987, p. IV-2)." Indeed, KABC-TV's ratings for the period increased from 8.3 (composite for the 12 weeks prior to the sweeps) to 10.5 for the eight day period when the stories ran, and 18.2 on the first night. While KABC-TV was the top rated 11 p.m. newscast during the May 1987 sweeps, rival KNBC-TV was number one if the disputed eight-day period was removed from the statistics.

The two cases cited are indicative of the ways in which broadcast exectives can blur the distinction between acceptable business practice and deception. John Severino, general manager of KABC-TV, defended his Nielsen series on the grounds that 1) it was a creative way to stay competitive in the Los Angeles market,

and 2) the appearance of Nielsen executives indicated their approval of the tactic, although Nielsen exectives claimed they did not know the series would run during the sweeps period, and have specific prohibitions about identifying Nielsen staff during the sweeps. In regards to the Atkinson cases, Steve Thaxton of KARE-TV claimed that, "We had to make sure it was done when HUT [Home Using Television] levels are high and when our product was in top shape (quoted in Rees, 1987, p. 140). The large number of questionaires mailed (one rival station had ten employees receive KARE surveys) was attributed to the need to have a large universe in oreder to offset small returns (2% in the KARE case). Ronald Atkinson went even further in defending his tactics during an apearance on ABC-TV's Nightline. He claimed that there was nothing unethical or illegal about the combination of research and promotion: KARE-TV's competitors were envious "because they didn't think of it first (quoted in Jaffe, 1987)."

The two cases noted were resolved in different ways. In the case of Atkinson Research, the appropriate Nielsen reports for Minneapolis, Atlanta and Orlando were footnoted with warnings that a research project had been in progress during the sweeps. The KABC-TV case resulted in the deleting of KABC-TV ratings for the disputed newscasts, an action that prompted KABC-TV to sue the A.C. Nielsen Company (McDougal, 1987). While that case was eventually settled out-of-court, the issues raised, along with the Atkinson cases, prompted the Electronic Media Ratings Council (E.M.R.C.) to formulate new guidelines for A.C. Nielsen and Arbitron regarding the hypoing of sweeps ratings. Specific

penalties recommended included printing special notices of "special station activities" in the printed reports and computer tapes, deleting ratings for the disputed time period, deleting all relevant dayparts ina given week and, most drastically, delisting the guilty stations from the entire ratings report (Katz, 1987). These penalties seem appropriate to the specific cases that prompted the E.M.R.C. guidelines, but this reflex action did not recognize the core dilemma: are the accepted programming strategies associated with periodic audience measurement themselves unethical, regardless of specific abuses such as those engaged in by KABC-TV and the stations associated with Atkinson Research?

Sweeps programming--Hyping the ratings

The motivation that leads to attempts to distort television ratings inheres within advertiser-supported television, so what is problematic about these alleged distortions? The difficulty in separating sound business practice from unethical, possibly illegal, behavior, was underscored in a study of management ethics published by the trade journal Electronic Media in February, 1988. Three questions in the survey questionaire dealt with attempts to distort the ratings through atypical programming and promotion. Sixty nine percent (69%) of the respondents felt some amount of hyping the ratings was necessary, and, of those who responded positively to the need, they were evenly divided as to the amount of hyping allowable. Only half of the total respondents felt a "comprehensive code of ethics" would help control unethical practices (Ethical Dilemmas, 1988). Tom

Donaldson, Wirtenberger Professor of Ethics at Loyola University (Chicago), who conducted the survey, was suprised himself at how infrequently some practices were mentioned, including the hyping of sweeps ratings (Donaldson, 1988).

Mel Goldberg, executive director of the E.M.R.C., places a station's programming and promotion strategies, and the relationship of those strategies to ratings, in the realm of ethics.

> We're talking about the ethical behavior of stations, and I don't know how you can legislate ethical behavior....[The E.M.R.C. is] a voluntary organization and, even though we've had Justice Department approval to do this for 25 years, we don't have the authority to make anyone stop [distorting ratings] (quoted in McDougal, 1988, p.82).

The E.M.R.C. tolerates the practice of hyping the ratings through atypical programming because it is widespread through the industry, as any reading of the broadcasting and advertising trade press reveals (see Tip-toeing, 1982, as an example of trade press reporting on broadcast industry meetings where effective methods of hyping the ratings are discussed, or Zotti, 1981, as an example of trade press advice to advertisers about how to take advantage of broadcasters' programming strategies during the sweeps to in order to engage in additional promotional activity).

In fact, the broadcast television industry (networks, affiliate stations, independent stations, independent producers and syndicators/distributers) are organized <u>in time</u> by the sweeps, creating an industrial rhythm. Programs designed to attract maximum numbers of viewers cannot be produced and transmitted continually, and the periodization induced

artificially by the ratings sweeps has allowed the industry to concentrate its efforts in approximately ten weeks of programming (November, February and the first two weeks in May). It cannot be viewed as coincidence that the ratings sweeps, particularly November and February, correspond to the times of the year when advertisers have the most money to spend on advertising and want to increase product awareness (before Christmas and before spring/summer). [3.] Despite the encrouchment of new technologies which threaten the future of the ratings sweeps (see concluding discussion), at least one advertising executive has expressed the opinion that advertisers want to be, and <u>will continue to want to be</u>, associated with network television ratings successes because of the promotional advantages derived from such successes that are above and beyond the marketing necesssity of purchased advertising time. "[Advertisers] believe in it. I don't think the sweeps will ever go away (quoted in Farley, 1987, p. 9).

The national television networks load their schedules with atypical programming during the sweeps (see Blum and Lindheim, 1987). Miniseries, specials, blockbuster motion pictures (even in the age of cable/home video saturation) and special editions of high-rated regularly scheduled programs (special guest stars, shows shot on location, etc.) proliferate on the schedule. Sweeps periods are also used to introduce new and returning series, because the other programming generates larger than normal audiences who can then sample the new series offerings. And, in an unusual circumstance, the Winter Olympics from Calgary were broadcast in prime time by the ABC network during the

February 1987 ratings sweeps (for February 1987 sweeps, see Networks Prepare; 1987b; for 1987, see Ready, set..., 1987a).

At the local station level, both news and non-news programming reflect the influence of sweeps. In news, it is routine practice to schedule provocative mini-documentary series and unusual stories during sweeps (Rosenberg, 1988; Safchik, 1988). In non-news programming, the syndicators and distributors provide both unique and sensational programming for independent stations and for non-prime time dayparts on affiliated stations. These programs are designed for sweeps in their focus on provocative (and, thereby, attractive) subject matter. For example, in 1987, Multimedia's Donohue program presented a pioneering week from the Soviet Union as well as these topics: "Men Who Love Boys," "Men Who Dress Like Woman," "Female Impersonators," "Bigamy," and "Sex Therapist" (see Rosenberg, 1987 for the entire list).

Tribune Entertainment is offering ON TRIAL: Lee Harvey Oswald on November 25, 1988 and is advertising the program in the trade press with the following copy:

> You can place your cients in front of 20 million witnesses at the most dramatic murder trial in history. 'ON TRIAL: Lee Harvey Oswald' is more than the major television event of the November rating period. It's a piece of history, an absorbing 5-hour trial from Dallas on the 25th anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination.
>
> Attorneys Vincent Bugliosi and Gerry Spence will cross-examine the actual witnesses, before a real judge and a jury. And home viewers, too, will render their verdicts with special '900' phone numbers.
>
> It's the trial Oswald never had. And it's an opportunity that advertisers will never have again. The show is already cleared on over 130 stations covering 89% of the U.S. Don't let your clients miss this chance to be part of history (from an advertisement in Electronic Media, September 26, 1988, p. 27, emphasis added).

This Geraldo Rivera-hosted special is the quintessential ratings sweeps program: historic, sensational, nostalgic, dramatic, interactive, and, most important, HYPE. The result is hoped to be a large, one-time only audience for this program, the ratings for which will influence the advertising rates charged by

the stations that carried ON TRIAL and therein lies the paradox of ratings hype: viewers attracted to atypical programming generate higher ratings that affect advertising rates for typical programs, so, in effect, the higher costs of ratings sweeps programming is subsidized by the higher rates charged for regular programming. Those higher rates are paid, in turn, not by the advertiser, but by the viewer, either directly, in the form of higher costs for the goods and services advertised or indirectly, in the continually shrinking diversity of programs transmitted in this proclaimed era of excess delivery channels (see Wakshlag and Adams, 1985, for an analysis of program diversity in prime time).

Ratings sweeps--the ethics of television economics

If the preceeding paradox indeed defines the economic practice of television, than the ethical dimensions of advertiser financed television in the era of monopoly capitalism becomes clear. The participants in the financial relationships that arise from commercial television have agreed on the techniques designed to attract and measure audiences for the purpose of setting advertising rates. Gitlin (1985) reported that television executives agree that the ratings are important more for their capacity to determine relative rankings than for their ability to determine audience size. In fact, the trade press is particularly candid about the manner in which actual advertising rates are negotiated around the rates listed on the network or station rate card (for example, Farley, 1988). The television industry agrees to the illusion of ratings quantification as symbolic of the way the industry interacts with the audiences it ostensibly serves.

However, those audiences are individual viewers, and a growing body of academic research is constructing an interpretation of these audiences that differs from the industrial view. This research goes beyond the process-

orientation perspective of uses-and-gratification research to examine television as cultural practice. Brunsdon and Morley (1981) and Katz and Liebes (1984), among others, demonstrate that viewers acquire, and engage in, strategies of resistence and opposition to the various ideologies circulated by television as capitalist institution, in order to make television valuable to them as individuals (see Fiske, 1987, for an overview of this interpretation). Television audiences can be quantified, but individual television viewers are more slippery: the ratings indicate audiences are co-present, but cannot guarantee that individual viewers will cooperate, and this is the fundamental ethical dilemma of commercial television.

For the television industry, quantitative audience measurement is the primary mechanism of audience commodification and the ratings sweeps are acts of containment on the part of the broadcasters. The sweeps convince advertisers that audiences are deliverable while providing individual viewers with a few weeks of atypical programming. Increasingly, the technology of audience measurement negates the need for periodicity (as of today, the 17 top television markets are measured electronically each day), but the need to attract large audiences will not be diminished. The immense up-front cost of television programs capable of generating larger-than-average audiences will continue to inhibit year-round production and advertising revenue will continue to coelesce at certain times of the year. As long as advertisers accept the broadcasters' claims of viewer cooperation, the ethical dilemmas of television economics will remain. With, or without, formal ratings sweeps, advertiser financed television broadcasters will continue to profit from this absurdity that substitutes the financial exigencies of private capital for the cultural potential of television as social communication.

Footnotes

1. It is suprising that the major texts designed to educate future station managers (other than Ouaal and Brown) devote little space to any discussion of the impact of ratings on the operation of a broadcast station. Invariably, the various authors limit the problem of generating audiences, and the concommitant problem of audience measurement, to the program director specifically, and to books on broadcast programming in general (see Marcus, 1986; McCavitt & Pringle, 1986; and Sherman, 1987).

2. The derivation of the term "sweeps" is subject to dispute. McDougal (1988) offers two versions. In one, the term derived from the concept of a broomstick "sweeping" away the competition and in another, the term comes from the word sweepstakes, a winner-take-all loterry, and the object was to be the only winner.

3. The correspondence of advertiser desires and broadcast programming strategies offer additional evidence of the connection between socio-economic patterns and the rhythyms of broadcast programming described by Browne (1984) as the television <u>(super)text</u>.

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